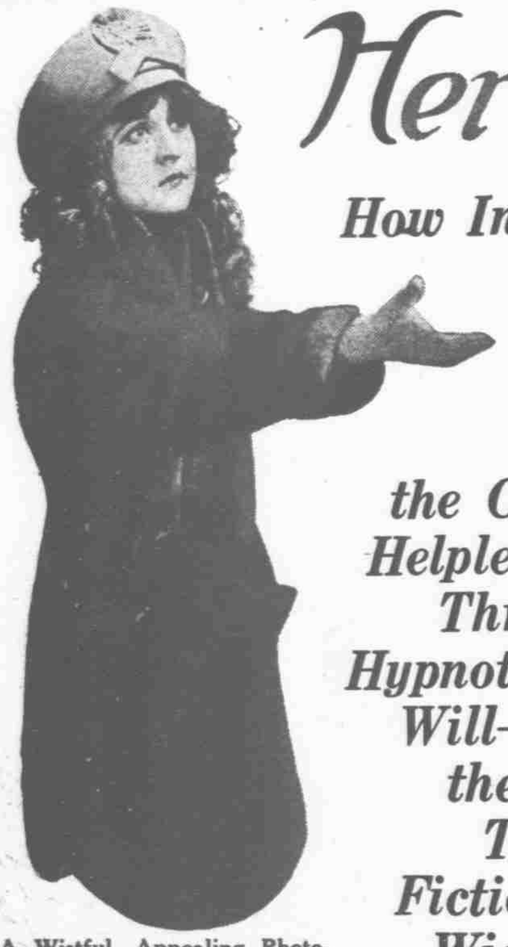
Her Heart, Body and Soul at His Mercy

How Innocent Little Norma McLeod Convinced a Learned Judge That She Was Blameless of the Crime She Did, Helpless Beneath the Thralldom of a Hypnotist's Evil Will—Just Like the Helpless Trilby of Fiction, and the Wicked Svengali



A Wistful, Appealing Photograph of Little Miss McLeod, Showing Her Youthful Face, Figure and Curls.

FOR the first time in legal history, a court of law has taken cognizance of hypnotism as a defense against a criminal charge and has released a prisoner on the ground that in performing the criminal act the accused was only a machine, animated by and helplessly obeying the will of a master mind.

Thus in real life we have the exact situation which made Du Maurier's famous novel, "Trilby," a classic of fiction.

Norma McLeod is the name of this present day incarnation of the novelist's fancy. Scarcely twenty-one, trembling, shaken down to the very depths of her soul by her experiences—but once again mistress of that soul, her heart and her body—she convinced a wise judge, skeptical lawyers and medical experts of the truth of her story, forcing them to accept what to them seemed at first and to many still may seem, the incredible.

And when she was finished Judge Thomas C. Crain, of the Court of Special Sessions, whose hair has grown white in his service of justice, said to her:

"The court releases you on a suspended sentence of five years because it believes that you were not responsible for the act you committed, but that you acted under the control of a will stronger than your own."

Harry Sanderson, a soldier of fortune, who, Norma McLeod says, was the Svengali to her Trilby, is missing—with the police seeking him so that he may be put in a place where the uncanny force of which he seems to be a master may be exerted against unimaginative, wholly practical jailers.

But unlike DuMaurier's Svengali, Sanderson does not seem to have had to depend upon the use of staring eyes, mystic passes with the hands and all the other tricks of the stage hypnotist. Svengali's methods were described by Du Maurier thus:

"But all at once—with one wave of his hand over her—with one look of his eye—with a word—Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby, his Trilby—and make her do whatever he liked.

"He had but to say 'sleep' and she suddenly became an unconscious Trilby—who could produce just the sounds he wanted and nothing else—and think his thoughts and wish his wishes—and love him at his bidding with a strange, unreal love—just his own love for himself turned inside out—*a l'envers*—and reflected back on him as from a mirror."

Miss McLeod says that her master was always very gentle with her, but that what he told her to do she had to do; that she possessed no will, no thought except his when he chose to exert his power over her. And that, like Trilby's, her heart, her body and her soul were at his mercy.

The specific charges upon which Miss McLeod was arrested was the forgery on a check of the name of Louis Missi, the landlord of the apartment house at 248 West Forty-eighth street, where Sanderson and the girl lived. Sanderson had a fancied grievance against Missi; he thought the latter was obstructing telephone messages to him. The forged check was punishment. To wreak this punishment he used Miss McLeod just as he would have used a pen or a pencil. Under his will she was nothing more than one of these instruments in the hand of the adventurer—and no more to blame for what was written than pen or pencil would have been. This, in effect, was the opinion of the court that freed her.

What kind of a girl is Miss McLeod that all her consciousness, her will and conscience could be so thrust out of her, leaving her body only a shell in which worked another's will and consciousness? How did she fall into the power of the master mind that controlled her? What were the methods by which slowly he possessed her—soul, heart and body?

Norma McLeod was, apparently, a normal child. She was high strung, imaginative with a curious strain of stubbornness—but these qualities are not unusual. There was some mystery about her origin. She was brought up by foster-parents and there is a story that her real father and mother were members of the company of a distinguished French actress who had left her behind when they sailed back to France. She received an excellent education, married a young man of good family and lived for a time happily in a suburban town.

Then ambition to become an actress seized her. Another curious parallel with Du Maurier's heroine now appears. Trilby, it will be remembered, posed in artists' studios. Norma McLeod's pet'te figure, her wistful, childlike face and gentle personality "registered," as the motion picture people say, on the screen. She took several fairly important parts in a number of successful films and seemed to be on the high road to success as a star when suddenly—she met Sanderson.

Somewhat shy, reserved, she had made no intimate friends. She was estranged from her husband. Her foster-parents, as she puts it, "were so sternly good that when I went on the stage they would have nothing to do with me." She had been taken ill. No one can be as lonely anywhere as one can be in New York. Norma McLeod lay in her apartment as lonely as any one in New York had ever been.

Trilby, you remember, after her beloved Little Billee, the Laird and Taffee sailed back to England and left her, went to Svengali—and not till then!

"I do not think I would ever have had this terrible story to tell if I had not been ill," she said. "I am not weak-minded. There are two traits uppermost in my character—stubbornness and gratitude. No one, when I was growing up in Minneapolis, nor among those in the companies in which I played, ever thought I was easily swayed by the will of others. One actress once said to me: "You are the stubbornest girl in the company. I wouldn't have your obstinacy for the world."

"One morning when I awoke feeling more wretched than ever, I saw a little square of white paper under my door. I crept out of bed and opened it. It was a note:

"'Poor little girl,' it said. 'I am sorry you're sick. I'd like to help you. If there is anything I can do, let me know.'

"It was signed 'Harry Sanderson.'

"A few minutes later there was a rap at the door. I cried, 'Come in.' A man came into the room. He brought me toast and coffee, and he was very kind to me. It was Sanderson.

"I was so grateful to him for his kindness that I could have kissed his hand. He bought me a kitten. Gradually I got to think of nothing but him. He said we would be married, and when he proposed moving away from that apartment house to another I went with him. He talked a great deal about when we should go back to England. He never once spoke harshly to me.

"And at last I found that whatever he told me to do that I must do! I who had been so stubborn had no thought but his, no will but his when he commanded me. Soul, heart and body—he was their master!

"Now that I am free I remember some very odd things. There was, for instance, what I might call the 'command of the black suit case.' He put the black suit case in my room one day, pointed to it and told me I must never open it. I used to sit by the hour looking at that suit case, wishing to open it, and every time I tried I could not even touch it. Sometimes he left his key ring behind and on it I would see the little, shining brass key that would open the case. I could not use it—I could not even touch it to the black suit case. Whenever I tried something seemed to reach out and kill my will to do it!

"Harry after a while grew short of funds. The landlord began to quarrel with him. Harry would sit and brood. Then he would burst out in terrific rages at Louis Missi. Missi kept the house where we lived at No. 248 West Forty-eighth Street. Harry said messages had come for him by telephone, that Missi didn't take the trouble to give him.' He said they were offers of work, and he lost the work. He said by neglecting those telephones Missi had done us both a great wrong. He had ruined our careers and made us penniless. One day he said, 'I'll put up a check on him.'

"Now, I am naturally honest. They used to joke with me in companies because they said I 'kept books.' If I borrowed a dollar I always repaid it. If I borrowed rouge from another girl I not only returned the rouge, but I returned the same shade of rouge. Yet the disintegration of my morality under the spell of this constant hypnosis was such that I interposed no objection to 'putting up a check.' I only said, 'What's the use? He hasn't any money.' 'O, yes, he has,' Harry answered. 'I know because while we were friendly I walked down to the bank with him and saw him deposit money.'

"'It will serve him right,' he said. 'He has kept me from making money.' He sat and practiced Louis Missi's signature for three days. He copied it from a receipt for rent which we had. When he thought he had the handwriting he slowly and carefully filled out the check and signed the name. He was so careful that it seemed hours that he was at work on that check. Then he turned it over and endorsed it in the same name, Louis Missi.

"Then he said to me: 'Now sit down and write Louise Missi under it.'

"'Who is Louise Missi?' I asked.

"'Nobody,' he answered, 'but the bank will think it is his sister.'

"Even in the strange state I was in I thought of another woman. I said:

"'Are you sure there isn't any Louise Missi that this might get into trouble?'

"'No,' he answered, looking steadily at me. 'Sit down.' I took my seat at the desk. He dipped the pen in the ink and handed it to me. He was always courteous.

"'Sign,' he said.

"I never thought of doing other than he told me. If he had told me to kill myself; if he had asked me to sit in a building that was on fire and wait until it burned to the ground, I would have done so.

"When I had written the name, he said: 'It will be better for you to go to the bank to cash this. They are not so likely to suspect a woman. If they ask who you are say you are his sister.'

"I hurried into my street clothes, and put on my hat and almost ran to the bank to reach it before it was closed.

"'Sign!' he said.

"I never thought of doing other than he told me. If he had told me to kill myself; if he had asked me to sit in a building that was on fire and wait until it burned to the ground I would have done so."

"I joined the line. The teller looked at me and said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'I am Louise Missi.' He said, 'Who is Louise Missi?' I answered, 'I am Louis Missi's sister.' He paid the money. I took it and went home and gave it to Harry.

"Three days later he 'put up' another check and sent me to the bank for the money. That time I didn't get the money. The teller said 'the account is overdrawn.'

"One day the detectives came to the house in East Fifty-fifth street, where we had moved from Louis Missi's. They arrested me for passing the check. They arrested him on a charge of theft.

"We were taken to the West Fifty-fourth Street Court. He remained in a little side room. There was a door between the rooms. It was open. Harry sat and looked at me. I was taken before the judge. The judge asked me questions. I didn't seem to understand the questions. I would turn to look at Harry. The judge said: 'Did you endorse the check?' I looked at Harry. He nodded. I said, 'Yes.' The judge said: 'Did you present the check at the bank?' I looked at Harry again. He nodded. I said, 'Yes.'

"I was sent to the Tombs. He got away. For he really hadn't stolen the things they had specified in the warrant.

"Those first weeks in the Tombs I can't remember. It is as though I had died, and had come back to life. Or, as though I had been in a long, deep sleep and awakened. That is about the way it feels to come out of a trance after one has been hynotized. It may be the reaction was so terrible in my case because I was in a continuous state of hypnotism.

"I shall do everything I can to aid the police in his capture. He may try to regain possession of my soul. But he will not. Not if I have to destroy this poor shell that is its house!

"I thought I was fairly happy while I was with this master of my will. But in the tormenting weeks when I was painfully coming out from beneath his spell I knew that I had been as wretched as a doomed soul in hell. It is one of the greatest of life's tragedies to lose control of your will. When there is no free will one is a prisoner, a prisoner of evil!"

This, the story she told a representative of this newspaper, is substantially the story that convinced Judge Cairns.

Dr. Perry Lichtenstein, the Tombs physician, testified before the court:

"She seemed to talk as though things were at a long distance, as if she could not grasp the subject. She was unable to keep up a conversation long at a time and would look off into space at that time.

"I do not believe that at the time she committed the act, nor at the time she came to the City Prison, she knew the nature nor quality of her act: She may have known that she was writing. She may have known that she gave her name, or put somebody else's name on the back of that check, but she did not realize the nature nor quality of her act. That is, she did not know that she was doing wrong. My opinion is that while she committed the act and for two weeks afterward she was irresponsible."

The Tombs had never swung back its iron gates to admit a more pitiable prisoner.

"She lived and acted and talked like some one who was far away," said Mrs. Helen Timko, the kindly investigator for the Voluntary Defenders' Committee. "If ever a girl was under hypnotic spell it was she. She was wholly irresponsible."

Miss McLeod as She Is Now, Freed from the Sinister Influence of the Mind That Mastered Her.